BD standoff exposes ICC's governance crisis ahead of T20 World Cup

ANALYSIS

By Mir Shabbar Ali

WITH less than three weeks to go before the T20 World Cup starts, the cricketing world looks on as the sport's global governing body deals with yet another crisis. The latest, too, involves India — the country from where the International Cricket Council's chairman and the CEO come from — naturally as the co-hosts of the 20-team showpiece.

Bangladesh don't want to play their matches in India and want them to be shifted to co-hosts Sri Lanka.

Things have come to this point after worsening political relations between the two countries over the last 12 months saw Bangladesh's star pacer Mustafizur Rahman being withdrawn from Indian Premier League franchise Kolkata Knight Riders' squad on the directives of the country's cricket board.

The Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) secretary Devajit Saikia cited "recent developments" as the reason for Mustafizur's ouster. Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) responded strongly, deciding not to play in India with security having become a major concern.

While the BCB said on Wednesday that the "ICC has conveyed its willingness to work closely" with the board to resolve the issue, the latter itself has chosen to not comment on the issue with reports emerging on Monday that Chennai and Thirivananthapuram have been put forward as venue to host Bangladesh's matches.

There also remains a possibility of Bangladesh not participating in the tournament.

The ICC, while trying to negotiate with the BCB, has not been able to show any kind of muscle as a governing body, especially against the host nation's board for letting cricket be affected by politics.

This raises question marks over the ICC's standing as a governing body in the face of India's dominance via producing the major chunk of revenue that runs it.

The body is led by Bharatiya Janata Party leader and India's Home Minister Amit Shah's son Jay, while ICC CEO Sanjog Gupta is also Indian. As former ICC president and Pakistan Cricket Board chairman Ehsan Mani views it, "the BCCI follows the political agenda of the BJP".

"The ICC should have a clear policy of not allowing member countries' politics to interfere with the game," he told *Dawn* last week.

Identifying the involvement of politics in the making of the decisions that run the sport as the most important concern, Mani claimed other strong cricket boards were not serious about taking it on.

"Unfortunately, ECB [England and Wales Cricket Board] and CA [Cricket Australia] together with BCCI are not prepared to address this and other serious governance issues and together they have prevented ICC from carrying out a governance review which I was pushing for as chairman of PCB," he said. "The ICC board is terribly conflicted, with each director looking after his country's interest before considering what is good for the game as a whole.

Mani said he expected the Bangladesh situation to be resolved through "a fudged solution, which will be engineered without addressing the governance failings of the ICC".

Former West Indies Cricket Board (WICB) chairman Dave Cameron, who served in the ICC's Finance and Commercial Affairs committee between 2013-19, echoed Mani's views, saying that the ICC needed to switch from being "a group of members" to becoming a proper governing body.

"Part of the challenge is that the ICC is not a governing council but is rather made up of countries that sit together as a members' group, and this is unfortunate," Cameron told *Dawn*. "As a governing council, there are some requirements, it's not being used in that way, which is the detriment at this point."

PAKISTAN'S OPPORTUNITY

It is not the first time that security concerns triggered by political tensions between India and another country have come to put a tournament at risk. When India hosted the 50-over Cricket World Cup in 2023, the PCB was convinced days before the event to send the national team across the border. A stronger deadlock emerged ahead of last year's Champions Trophy — of which the official hosts were Pakistan — with India refusing to return their neighbours' 2023 gesture.

The ICC had to come up with a "hybrid model" to resolve the Champions Trophy matter and decided that Pakistan and India will play at neutral venues if the global tournament is being hosted by either of the two nations. That decision was hailed as Pakistan's psychological win in the backdrop of the Indian financial and administrative muscle.

With the recent political shift in Bangladesh triggered by Sheikh Hasina's ouster as the country's prime minister and a consequential change of regime in the BCB, the PCB, led by Pakistan interior minister Mohsin Naqvi, has got closer to the latter.

Naqvi — also the Asian Cricket Council chief currently — and BCB president Aminul Islam were also reportedly at the forefront in making the 2025 Asia Cup happen amid calls for a boycott coming from India.

Former PCB chairman Najam Sethi, who himself has been in the midst of the Pakistan-India cricket issues during his previous tenure, the ongoing tensions are an opportunity for the PCB to form a pressure bloc within the ICC along with the BCB.

"Earlier, on any issue, Pakistan could not count on support from any ICC member if its stance differed from India's, now it will have Bangladesh on its side," Sethi told *Dawn*. "Their joint clout will be greater than the sum of their parts."

The Pakistan cricket leadership seemed to have sensed the opportunity after Mustafizur was snubbed by the BCCI as it the PCB announced zealously days after the fast bowler's registration for the Pakistan Super League's players' draft.

Social media feeds on Sunday, meanwhile, carried unconfirmed reports of the PCB offering to host Bangladesh's T20 World Cup matches in Karachi, Lahore and Rawalpindi.

"PCB and BCB should scratch each other's shoulders in their respective leagues to cobble a common front against the rest of the Boards," Sethi said.

By Monday evening, BCCI secretary Saikia, as per reports, confirmed no communication was made by the ICC over a potential change of venues for the Bangladesh matches. Henceforth, as the clock ticked and the T20 World Cup neared, uncertainty prevailed and so did the ICC's deafening silence.

Pakistan conceded too many runs in SL series decider, says Salman

DAMBULLA: Pakistan conceded "too many runs" to allow Sri Lanka level the three-match Twenty20 International series, national side captain Salman Ali Agha said after the final game at the Rangiri Dambulla International Stadium on Sunday.

Pakistan won the first match by six wickets while the second game was washed out before Sri Lanka came back to take the rain-marred third game by 15 runs.

After the match was cut down to 12 overs per innings, Sri Lanka smashed 160, riding on Dasun Shanaka's nine-ball 34, a target Pakistan fell short of eventually.

"We conceded too many runs. 160 is always going to be too many," Salman said in the post-match press conference. "But we always believe we can chase whatever target is thrown at us. That's why we got that close."

Salman himself was up to the task, coming in to bat at number three after Pakistan lost opener Sahibzada Farhan early. The right-hander played a stunning 12-ball knock for 45, which featured three sixes and four fours but failed to go on for long enough to take Pakistan over the line.

"When you're chasing 160, you just watch the ball and try to hit and maximise every single delivery," he noted. "That's what I was trying to do.

"I wish I could have batted three or four more overs — it would have been even more entertaining. But yes, I would have been very happy if it was in a winning cause."

The series served as a warm-up for Pakistan ahead of next month's T20 World Cup, which is set to be co-hosted by Sri Lanka, where Salman and co. will play all their matches of the showpiece. The all-rounder said he would have preferred more games in the series.

"I would have loved to have a five-game series," he observed. "At least then we would have had three games to decide who won the series.

"But for us, this series was about preparation for the World Cup. We know Sri Lanka always has rain.

"Today was a learning experience for us — how to bowl with a wet ball. I think that's going to play a big part in the World Cup as well. So it was a good learning experience, and I think we've ticked that box."

The series also saw all-rounder Shadab Khan make his return for Pakistan for the first time since June last year. The leg-spinner was brilliant with the ball in the first T20I, taking 2-25 and also contributing with the bat later on.

Pakistan also tested promising batter Khawaja Nafay in the final ODI and saw him impress with 26 off 15 as they tested their depth ahead of the T20 World Cup. Pacer Salman Mirza, too continued his form.

"The positives: the way Nafay batted today was outstanding, and the way Salman bowled as well," captain Salman said. "Shadab Khan came back after a long injury and bowled really well in both matches, and he batted well too." —Agencies

FORD Racing's driver Nani Roma of Spain and compatriot co-pilot Alex Haro compete during the eighth stage of the Dakar Rally on Monday.—AFP

Variawa wins Dakar eighth stage, Al-Attiyah retains overall lead

WADI AD-DAWASIR: Saood Variawa won the eighth stage of the Dakar Rally in a South African one-two with Henk Lategan on Monday as Nasser Al-Attiyah saw his overall lead cut to four minutes in the Saudi Arabian desert.

Dacia Sandriders driver Al-Attiyah finished fifth and one minute and 16 seconds behind 20-year-old Toyota SA driver Variawa, who beat factory entry Lategan by three seconds on the 483km loop around the southern city of Wadi Ad Dawasir.

The Qatari's closest rival Mattias Ekstrom was third for Ford in the longest stage of the 48th edition of the rally.

"The car was perfect on a very long stage on which it was difficult to keep up with the pace," said Variawa.

"In the dunes, we navigated well while a lot of others got lost. At times we went our own way and perhaps that's where we made a difference. We pushed and overtook other cars. It was difficult in the dust."

Last year's Dakar runner-up Lategan moved up to third overall, six minutes and eight seconds off the lead with five stages remaining before Saturday's finish in the Red Sea port of Yanbu.

The one-two was the fourth ever by South African drivers in the car category.

Ford's Nani Roma and Carlos Sainz were fourth and fifth, respectively.

Sixth-placed Sebastien Loeb, the nine-times world rally champion driving for Dacia, remained in contention and was within 17 minutes of his leading team-mate.

"We made a little mistake close to the finish and we lost around three minutes," said Al-Attiyah, a five times Dakar winner. "But OK, I am really happy from the performance. We don't lose a lot of time. I think we did a good job."

Predictions that this year's Dakar would be the closest battle yet were backed up by the top five in the standings, from three different teams, being separated by 10 minutes and 39 seconds.

Reigning Dakar champion Yazeed Al-Rajhi of Saudi Arabia withdrew last week.

In the motorcycle category, Argentina's Luciano Benavides took his third stage win in four days and seized the overall lead for the first time in his career from Australian KTM team-mate and defending champion Daniel Sanders.

Benavides, who had started the day nearly five minutes adrift, leads Sanders by 10 seconds with American Honda rider Ricky Brabec third and four minutes 47 seconds off the pace.

"These last two stages were a little bit faster and in these conditions I feel really good, I can read the roadbook super well and take really good decisions," said Benavides.

The Dakar began in 1978 as a race from Paris across the Sahara to the Senegalese capital but switched to South America in 2009 for security reasons. It moved to Saudi Arabia in 2020. —Agencies

Injured Sundar ruled out of NZ one-dayers

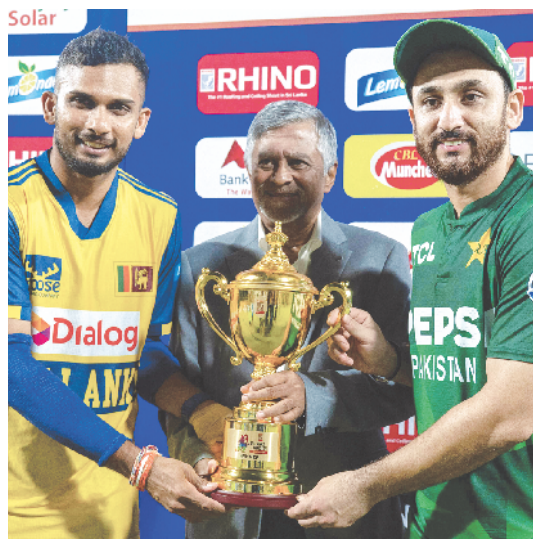
NEW DELHI: India were hit with an injury scare ahead of their Twenty20 World Cup title defence next month after all-rounder Washington Sundar was ruled out of the remaining two One-day Internationals against New Zealand due to rib discomfort.

Sundar complained of the issue affecting his left lower rib while bowling in Sunday's opening ODI, which the hosts won by four wickets, the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) said in a statement.

"He will undergo further scans, following which the BCCI medical team will seek expert opinion," the statement read.

Spin-bowling all-rounder Sundar is part of a 15-man squad for the World Cup beginning on Feb 7, which India is co-hosting with Sri Lanka.

Sundar's replacement Ayush Badoni will link up with the ODI squad in Rajkot ahead of the second match against New Zealand on Sunday. —Reuters



SRI LANKAN captain Dasun Shanaka (L) and his Pakistan counterpart Salman Ali Agha pose with the Twenty20 International series trophy after the third match at the Rangiri Dambulla International Stadium.—AFP

Swiatek insists 'everything is fine' after back-to-back defeats

SYDNEY: Iga Swiatek insists "everything is fine" despite back-to-back losses in the lead-up to the Australian Open, with the world number two "super sore" but confident of recovering for the season-opening Grand Slam.

The Polish star crashed 3-6, 6-0, 6-3 to Switzerland's Belinda Bencic in the mixed-teams United Cup final in Sydney on Sunday, which came on the back of a lacklustre 6-4, 6-2 defeat to Coco Gauff in the semi-finals.

A shellshocked Swiatek lost seven games in a row against Bencic, including a rare set to love, with a racquet toss and tears at the end of the match summing up her frustration.

It was uncharacteristic for the six-time Grand Slam winner, who rarely loses consecutive matches.

She most recently did so at the WTA Finals in Riyadh in November, falling to Elena Rybakina and Amanda Anisimova. Before that, her previous back-to-back defeats were in 2021.

"Everything is fine," she said after the final, which Poland won 2-1 courtesy of Katarzyna Kawa and Jan Zielinski clinching the deciding mixed doubles.

"Just super sore. I guess first tournament of the year, it costs the body a bit differently than during the season. But I had similar experience last year also.

"I'll just get good recovery, couple days off.

"Also I know these team events. I love them but they really take a lot of energy from you. I still need to figure out how to balance that maybe in the future."

Swiatek, who picked up solid wins over Eva Lys, Suzan Lamens and Maya Joint before meeting Gauff and Bencic, admitted she physically was not in the second set against the Swiss.

"I think it was a mix of me losing the intensity, and I wasn't feeling so sharp with movements and with my legs. I wasn't so precise any more physically I would say," she said.

With the Australian Open starting at Melbourne Park on Sunday, Swiatek has little time to iron out her technical issues after 36 unforced errors to Bencic's 10 on Sunday.

"We're going to work now to improve some elements that didn't work this week," she said. "Still not a lot of time for that if I also want to have some recovery days. This is how tennis is. You got to go with the flow. We'll see."

The Australian Open is the only Grand Slam title to evade the 24-year-old, who has made the semi-finals twice but never gone further.

She lost in the last four in 2025 to eventual champion Madison Keys.—AFP

At 37, Kohli reinvents himself to extend ODI dominance

NEW DELHI: Virat Kohli has tweaked his approach to counter-attack early in his innings and put bowlers under pressure to flip the momentum for India, the batting stalwart said after his match-winning knock in Sunday's One-day International against New Zealand.

The number three batter crafted 93 off 91 balls as India chased down a target of 301 with one over to spare en route to a four-wicket victory in the opener in Vadodara.

After opener Rohit Sharma fell for 26 in the ninth over, Kohli refused to retreat into a defensive shell.

Instead, he took the initiative in a match-defining 118-run stand with skipper Shubman Gill (56), using controlled aggression to force New Zealand's attack onto the back foot.

"Well, the basic idea is I bat at No.3," Kohli said after winning the player of the match award.

"So if the situation is a bit tricky, I back myself to counterattack now rather than just trying to play the situation in because some ball has your name on it."

Batting great Kohli is active internationally only in the 50-overs format. His masterclass on Sunday was the 37-year-old's fifth consecutive 50-plus score in ODIs.

In his 17th year in international cricket, he continues to reinvent himself and said he now aims to make the most of the first 20 deliveries after coming in at first drop.

"There's no point waiting around for too long. But at the same time, you don't play outrageous shots. You still stick to your strengths, but you back yourself enough to put the opposition on the back foot," he said.

"I just felt like if I push hard now in the first 20 balls, then we can probably string in a partnership straight after a wicket like Rohit's where the opposition is going to go on the back foot.

"That actually ended up being the difference in the game."

India take on New Zealand in the second ODI of the three-match series in Rajkot on Wednesday.—Reuters

Ex-Test cricketer Mohammad Ilyas is no more

By Our Sports Reporter

LAHORE: Former Pakistan Test cricketer and chief selector Mohammad Ilyas passed away in Lahore on Monday due to illness. He was 79.

Ilyas left behind a widow and three daughters. He was laid to rest at a local graveyard late in the evening on Monday.

In ten Tests he played from 1964 to 1969, Ilyas scored 441 runs with the help of a century and two half-centuries at an average of 23.21.

His career was shortened following his altercation with former PCB chief Abdul Hafeez Kardar during a Pakistan team's tour to Australia.

Later, he settled in Australia and then shifted to England before returning to Pakistan in early 2000.

Ilyas was named as chief selector of Pakistan's national junior team in 2010 and acted as the selection head of national women's team also during the tenure of PCB chief Ijaz Butt (2008-11).

Ijaz made Ilyas, who was a senior member of the men's team selection committee, the makeshift chief selector, after Mohsin Khan resigned from the position.

Ilyas, however, had to quit the post after he developed differences with new PCB chairman Zaka Ashraf over the issue of Shahid Afridi's selection in 2011.

Pakistan's Test team picked by Ilyas-led committee whitewashed a strong England side in a three-match series against a strong England side in the UAE in 2011-12.

On his recommendation, Ijaz appointed Misbah-ul-Haq as Pakistan skipper, who later proved himself as the country's most successful captain.

Ilyas featured in 82 first-class matches scoring 4,607 runs at 35.71 with the help of 12 centuries and 13 half-centuries.

He was the product of Crescent Club, which is one of the oldest clubs in Lahore.